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UNUSUAL HUMAN FOODS

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IN that interesting book by Simmons, "Animal Food," published many years ago, is described almost every imaginable kind of animal food used by civilized and savage races of man, from man himself, in the interesting, if gruesome, chapters on cannibalism, down to the lower invertebrates.

It is my purpose, in this short article, to call attention only to those types of animal food not commonly eaten by Americans that I have actually eaten and proved to be palatable. Many others might, of course, be mentioned on good authority, but only those which I have myself eaten will be described. Some of these obviously could have no economic importance in the United States; others might be added to our menus, and a few are already on the market in some localities.

Let us begin with the highest group of animals, the Mammalia.

Monkeys. Owing to the strong anatomical resemblances between man and some of the monkeys, it is possible that some of the reported cases of cannibalism have been due to mistaking monkeys, which are quite generally used for food in some countries, for human infants or children. This resemblance would probably be sufficient to deter most people from eating monkey meat, if the animal were cooked entire, but if the hands, head and feet be removed and the body be dismembered, the human resemblance is lost and, unless told, the average person would not know what animal he was eating. Monkey stew or minced monkey meat would probably be eaten and enjoyed by anyone who did not know what animal was before him. As in all animals, the flesh may be tough or tender, probably depending upon the age of the monkey and on how it is prepared. Just what familiar flesh it resembles in taste it is hard to say, but it is certainly a very agreeable food.

Peccary or bush-hog is another animal that makes a very acceptable dish, though, of course, not one of any importance outside the countries where these animals occur. The flesh may sometimes be tough, but is excellent, resembling, as might perhaps be expected, pork more than anything else.

Opossum. This animal is familiar to most people in this country, but, except among the negroes of the South, is not fully appre-

ciated as an article of food. While not numerous enough in most sections to be of much importance it might be raised in captivity. Its flesh is quite pleasant to the taste, possibly resembling fresh pork as much as anything.

Woodchuck or ground-hog is a very familiar rodent in many parts of the country, being so numerous in some places as to be quite a serious pest. Why the ground-hog is not more generally eaten is hard to understand, for, when properly cooked, it can scarcely be told from rabbit. Its legs being small it does not have the fine hams of the rabbit, but there is sufficient flesh on a good sized animal to be well worth cooking. It is customary to soak the flesh in water to remove the "gamy" taste, though the necessity for this is doubtful.

Muskrats are sold in the eastern markets under the name of marsh hares, at about the same price, per pound, as rabbits. They may be cooked in the same way that rabbits and squirrels are prepared, and possibly would not be distinguished in taste, by the average person, from the more familiar animals.

Considering the enormous numbers of muskrats that are killed for their fur, this animal should be more generally used for food. The flesh is darker, before cooking, and is not so attractive as that of the rabbit, but its taste when well prepared is certainly excellent.

We Americans have many silly ideas and prejudices in regard to what is fit to eat, and it is one of these prejudices that keeps many people from eating woodchuck, perhaps because of its relation to rats and other disagreeable rodents; people do not seem to realize that rabbits and squirrels, which they do not hesitate to eat, are also rodents.

Whale meat has been used for food by the Japanese and others for generations, but it is only within a few years that we Americans have begun to realize the possibilities of these huge mammals as a source of food. It is said that there are no "choice cuts" on a whale; all the flesh is equally good. Imagine an animal from which Porterhouse steaks may be cut in half-ton chunks!

On our Pacific Coast and, perhaps, in the largest cities of the east, fresh whale meat may be bought in the markets. The writer has never tasted the fresh meat. In certain western cities whale meat is canned, and in this form may be obtained almost anywhere. This canned meat looks like canned beef, and when made into stews or cooked in other ways would probably not be distinguished by the average person from excellent canned beef. Why it is not more generally used it is difficult to understand, unless the popular idea that whales are fishes has something to do with it.

Birds, unfortunately, are nearly all suitable for human food. The writer is opposed, on principle, to the use, under ordinary circumstances, of birds as food, with the exception, of course, of domestic breeds and perhaps certain of the water fowl.

However, there is one bird, only too well known in almost every corner of the United States, that might well be an article of diet; it is the house or *English sparrow*. There is very little difference of opinion in regard to this species; it is a pest—in some places a serious nuisance—against which a nationwide war of extermination has been declared. In destroying these birds by traps or guns, why not make use of them as food? To be sure they are small, but they are nearly as large as the bobolink that was formerly so extensively used for food under the name of reed-bird. They are easily prepared, and when properly roasted taste just as good, so it seems to the writer, as the famous reed-birds. The bones are so tiny that most of them can be eaten along with the flesh. At certain seasons of the year when they congregate in large flocks it is not difficult to shoot, with fine shot, or to trap in various ways, these birds in considerable numbers. If the use of English sparrows as food could be encouraged it might help in the war to reduce their numbers.

Edible birds' nests, while of no importance in this country, form quite an important article of commerce in some parts of the Orient. In China, which is apparently the chief market, they bring fancy prices. These nests are, as is well known, formed of the dried saliva-like secretion of birds, and are of about the size and shape of the nests of cemented twigs built by our chimney swifts. The material resembles gelatine and when treated with water swells in about the same way. Properly cooked the edible bird's nest is supposed to be a remarkable delicacy. The writer prepared, according to the only recipe available, a nest obtained near the Island of Palawan of the Philippine group. The result was a gelatinous mass without a particle of taste. Either the nest was stale or there was something wrong with the method of preparation, since none of those who tasted it was enthusiastically anxious for more.

The writer once ordered bird's nest soup at a Chinese restaurant. While the taste was excellent, there was nothing but the name on the menu to indicate that the dish was not ordinary chicken soup. Besides the fine particles of chicken there were small, tasteless lumps of gelatine that *may* have been bird's nest or may have been ordinary gelatine. There was absolutely no taste other than what would be expected in chicken soup. Perhaps the soup has been Americanized to satisfy the present demand.

Reptiles. There is scarcely a group of animals against which there is such a general and unreasoning prejudice as the Reptilia, and this applies as much to their use as food as it does in other respects.

Almost anyone will eat turtles, nearly all species of which may be used for food; yet when alligators or lizards are suggested they are usually declined with disgust, often with the statement "because they are reptiles." An illustration of this was once seen in South America. The writer had expressed the desire to taste the flesh of the iguana, which lizard was said by the English gentleman, whose guest he was, to be commonly used for food. The Englishman spoke enthusiastically of the flavor of the big lizard; but when a few hours later, the writer, after skinning a freshly killed caiman or South American alligator, suggested cooking some of the flesh, this same Englishman declined, with vigorous expressions of disgust, to consider eating the crocodilian. Another illustration was seen years ago in central Florida. The individual, in this case, instead of being an educated English gentleman, was a very ignorant and crude youth, who had said that he would not be caught eating a dirty "varmint" like a 'gator. Shortly afterwards, during his absence from camp, we cooked some alligator steaks, and on his return, had them served as "fish." We all partook; the youth in question eating with evident enjoyment the despised "varmint" under the name of "fish."

The writer has described in a previous issue of this journal¹ an alligator dinner given at a boarding house in a college town, where some thirty people, of both sexes and of various occupations, ate alligator meat every individual declaring the meat to be unusually palatable. In this case the meat was cut into pieces and cooked in cracker crumbs, like a breaded veal cutlet, which it resembled somewhat in taste and texture. It is probably the silly prejudice, illustrated above, that keeps the alligator from being used extensively as a source of fresh meat in the regions where the species is found.

The use of *turtles* as food, from the lowly snapper to the aristocratic diamond-back, is too familiar to need mention here. The use of the eggs of these animals is less common, especially in this country, though in some tropical regions they are extensively used. While scarcely comparable to the fresh eggs of domestic fowls, some turtle eggs are decidedly palatable.

Amphibia. As among the reptiles, so among the amphibia, there is an unjustifiable prejudice against certain forms by people who do not hesitate to eat other species. Almost anyone will eat

¹ December, 1917.

frog legs (for some reason only the hind legs are commonly eaten, though the rest of the muscular parts are equally good), while very few people would dream of using the larger salamanders, closely related to the frogs, as food. Of course these salamanders can not be obtained in such large numbers as frogs, and, their legs being small, most of the meat would have to be obtained from their tails; but some of them are quite large, and are more or less of a pest in streams where they abound, so that it would seem a waste of good food to destroy them instead of eating them.

The *axolotl* and other moderate sized salamanders are said to be used as food in Mexico and to be exposed for sale in the Mexican markets. Perhaps the most common of these large salamanders is *Necturus*, popularly known as the *mud-puppy* or *water-dog*, though these names are also applied to *Cryptobranchus* or the hellbender. As *necturus* is rather thick-bodied and may reach a length of 12 to 18 inches there is considerable meat upon it, which in flavor is very similar to that of frogs. The animal is harder to skin than the frog, but it may be cooked in the same way, and it is doubtful if the average person would distinguish between the taste of its flesh and that of a similarly prepared frog.

Cryptobranchus allegheniensis, the American giant salamander or hellbender, popularly known as *alligator* or *water-dog* is the largest of American salamanders, reaching a length of two feet and a weight of nearly two pounds. It is found in the waters tributary to the Ohio River, in some places being quite abundant. As in *Necturus* the legs are too small to be of use as food, and as in *Necturus* the skin is rather hard to remove; but the flesh is equally agreeable and during the breeding season the eggs, of which a considerable mass may be found in a single animal, are also of a very pleasant flavor.

An illustration of the persistence of the taste of ether in an animal killed with that reagent was seen in a hellbender which after being etherized, was skinned, cleaned, washed and, after several hours, was fried in egg and cracker crumbs. In spite of the washing, the intervening hours, and the heat of cooking the flesh still retained a distinct flavor of ether, though the eggs had no such taint.

Fishes. Since nearly all of the common fishes are used for food, and there is but little popular prejudice against members of the class, attention will be called to but one group that should be more generally made use of as food: this is the *Elasmobranchs*, or sharks and skates. In the markets of China these forms are com-

monly displayed for sale. The fins, especially of certain species, are in demand as a source of gelatine.

Certain of our sharks are now canned and put on the market under the trade names "gray fish," "deep-water swordfish" and perhaps other names. While not of such a desirable flavor as canned salmon these canned sharks are excellent substitutes for fresh fish and should be more generally used. The addition which their use would make to our food supply may be seen from a statement made by Kellogg in his "The Shellfish Industries" that "It has been estimated that thirty-seven million dogfish, equal in weight to half the total catch of the Massachusetts fishermen, were taken by them in 1905."

Of invertebrates but one or two will be mentioned. Nearly everyone likes lobster, either fresh or canned, but its near relative of fresh waters, the *crayfish*, is unknown as an article of food in many regions where it is quite abundant. In certain sections of the west and south crayfish are used as food and are extensively canned, but, as has been said, they are unknown as an article of food in many places where, if not sufficiently abundant to sell commercially, they could be easily collected in sufficient numbers for family use. When prepared in about the same way that fresh lobster is cooked the crayfish makes a decidedly pleasant dish, and the mass of abdominal muscle in the "tail" of a large crayfish is considerable.

Fresh water mussels. In many of the rivers and other bodies of fresh water in various parts of the country are found several species of fresh water mussels. In some localities where they are of certain species and are of sufficient abundance they are collected and their shells are used for making pearl buttons. It may be possible that these mussels are used for food at times, but I have never heard that this is done. Owing to the frequent pollution by sewage of the streams in which they live, it would probably be unwise to eat them raw, but there is no reason why they should not be eaten after being properly cooked. They are, to be sure, sometimes very tough, but this might be remedied by special methods of cooking, and the flavor, while not so delicious as that of some of the salt water bivalves, is decidedly agreeable.

Squid and perhaps other cephalopod molluscs are sometimes displayed for sale under the name of devil-fish, by Italian stores, even at a distance from the coast. They are used in making soup and possibly in other ways.

The writer had a soup or stew made from an eviscerated specimen, using milk, seasoning with salt and pepper, and adding a

lump of butter. The flesh, while not so delicate as that of an oyster, was not especially tough, and the soup was very much like that made from oysters, but with an additional taste that was not very agreeable. Possibly the addition of celery or some other flavoring substance might counteract this undesirable taste.

This devilfish soup was given to a domestic science class of about twenty young women; about half of these young women voted that they liked the preparation, and all were interested in trying a new dish.

At thirty cents a pound it is not likely that squid will become especially popular on American tables.

The reluctance of people towards eating untried articles of food is mentioned by V. Stefansson in an article in *THE SCIENTIFIC MONTHLY* for December, 1920. He says: "Similarly we found that 'well brought-up' men, used in their homes to a large variety of foods, both domestic and imported, take very readily to any new thing (such, for instance, as seal meat). But men 'poorly brought-up' and used to only half a dozen or so articles of food in their regular diets are generally very reluctant to try a new food unless it has been represented to them in advance as an expensive or specially delicious thing." . . . "For one thing, the man of the laboring type has a feeling of being degraded when he is compelled to eat the food of 'savages,' while the man of the intellectual type is appealed to by the mild flavor of adventure in experimenting with 'native food.'" Stefansson found that Eskimo women were much slower to try new kinds of food than were the men.